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VIA NOVA—THE DIRECT METHOD¹

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The author of this text is one of the best known of the exponents of the use of direct method of teaching the classics. He writes almost entirely from the point of view of the situation in England, and with the purpose of setting forth as clearly and definitely as possible the actual procedure under the direct method. The number of schools as yet using this method is so small that he finds it necessary to base his remarks largely upon his own experience and observation. For this he offers an apology; but, as a matter of fact, his testimony gains in value from its very directness.

The introductory chapter of the book gives a general description of the nature of the direct method, and contains a lengthy extract from a report submitted by a committee of the Association for the Reform of Latin Teaching. Chapter ii deals with the preliminary preparation of the boy who is to undertake the study of Latin by the direct method. The third and fourth chapters are devoted to a consideration of the several departments of the work—translation, composition, grammatical study, the use of illustrative material, such as pictures, charts, etc. Chapters v to viii, inclusive, map out the ground to be covered in successive years; and the final chapter takes up an administrative question: “The Position of the Classics in the Curriculum.” Then follow an epilogue, an appendix with specimens of work done by direct-method pupils, and a brief bibliography.

Though this volume is intended for English schoolmasters, it contains many a hint that ought to be carefully considered by those who would introduce the use of the direct method into the schools of America. To single out and present together a few of these hints may give a somewhat distorted impression of the book as a whole.

¹ *Via Nova*. (Cambridge Handbooks for Teachers.) By W. H. S. Jones. Cambridge: at the University Press. Pp. xii+175.

But the very fact that so ardent an advocate of the use of the direct method as Mr. Jones sees and admits the difficulties and dangers that beset the use of that method certainly justifies special scrutiny of these points.

Of the preliminary training expected before a boy undertakes Latin, Mr. Jones says (p. 36): "Complete success with the direct method can be obtained only if the learner be carefully prepared during early boyhood. From the age of about nine he should be taken through a course of study to facilitate the mastery of foreign languages." This course should include training in (a) phonetics, (b) general grammar, (c) English composition, and (d) preferably one or two years of French. "On this foundation a sound superstructure can be built. Without it, success will be very uncertain" (p. 42). These conditions are far from being realized in American schools, where Latin is usually taken up (if at all) as the first foreign language, and it is expected that English (including grammar) will be taught through the medium of instruction in Latin.

The vagueness of the first years under the direct method is confessed by Mr. Jones with surprising candor (pp. 152 ff.): "But if a boy leaves off Latin after two years, or migrates to another school, the result is somewhat disappointing. A boy learning on the direct method forms ideas which, vague at first, gradually increase in clearness and precision. The full effects of the early work are visible only after a time, and then they are cumulative. It often happens that for two years a boy, though lively and bright, shows no signs of accurate scholarship, and, if tested by an examination of the usual type, would be pronounced a failure."

This is a serious consideration, for American schools at least; for in them the large majority of Latin students do not continue the subject beyond the second year. The burning question at the present time is so to administer the work of the first two years that *all* the students enrolled, whether they are to go farther or not, shall reap a definite and concrete benefit in return for the time expended. If this consummation cannot be realized in the case of bright students under the best direct-method instructors in the English schools that have used the method for some years, what can be hoped for in classes under the direction of inexperienced teachers?

It seems to be assumed that in the English schools the pupil will continue the study of Latin for six years; and it is stated above that the vagueness and obscurity of the earlier years clears up later in the course. To an outsider, like the reviewer, this appears to be the crucial problem of the direct method—namely, so to plan and execute a course of study that initial chaos shall give way to order and scattered impressions shall be brought into a rational synthesis. The responsibility thrown upon the individual teacher is exceedingly heavy, and failure would be all too easy. Mr. Jones makes no attempt to gloss over the difficulty of the teacher's position, as the following citations will show:

"It cannot be too urgently pleaded that the direct method leaves, and must leave, very much to the teacher's discretion, and also implies a teacher capable of exercising the highest kind of discipline" (p. 79). "The freedom exercised by the teacher in the order of presentation must not be allowed to degenerate into chaotic license" (p. 86). "The teacher will be obliged to train himself to paraphrase readily and accurately in the ancient languages. Unless the teacher has this power, his teaching cannot be a success, and may be a bad failure" (p. 71). "The teacher's own scholarship must stand the test of oral lessons" (p. 87). "To be able to sketch, to be a lively actor—these are invaluable aids to the teacher" (p. 73.) "If the direct method is adopted, the teacher is saved a considerable amount of labor in correcting exercises, and so receives some slight compensation for the physical strain the system imposes, a strain which even the strongest feel for a time, until experience results in economy of effort, and the body adapts itself to new conditions" (p. 82).

Via Nova repeats the stock arguments in favor of the direct method, but without any effort to weight them critically. Indeed, some of them are rather carelessly applied. For example, emphasis is put upon the fact that the direct method calls into play eye, ear, and voice, thus securing a triple impression. But, it may be asked, what method does *not* employ all these, albeit in different proportion? Moreover, nothing is said of the various kinds of word memory found in various individuals, some having an aural, others a visual, memory. Then, too, the appeal to the eye and to the ear

are two very different things. For instance, the appeal to the ear is instantaneous and evanescent; but the eye can linger upon the printed word until it strikes home. Here is a subject the surface of which is hardly scratched.

Another complacent assumption of the direct-method school is that by the exclusion of the use of English words in teaching Latin the idea is grasped in all its purity by the student, without any distortion due to passing through a "foreign" medium. Consequently, condemning the current practice of testing a student's understanding of a Latin passage through his English translation, Mr. Jones says (p. 4): "It may well be doubted whether translation is a good instrument of education before the learner's mind is alive to its serious difficulties. Very few words in any language have exact equivalents in any other; so much of the force of a word depends upon its traditional associations. 'Friend' in English and φίλος in Greek afford a typical example."

There are, of course, two different cases to be recognized at this point. First, there are the names of concrete things (such as *canis*, *equus*, etc.). These could be translated into English without any distortion due to the "foreign" medium; but, true to its policy, the direct method would display a picture of a dog, write the word *canis* on the board, pronounce the Latin word, and have the class repeat it. But, so far as fixing the Latin word in the mind is concerned, it may well be questioned whether the use of the picture is as efficacious as giving outright the English word "dog," and suggesting the related English word "canine."

The other case presents itself when a picture is not available, or the Latin word is of such a nature that its meaning cannot be represented graphically or by pantomime. In this case what is the presumption? That the student will get the meaning of the word more exactly through the medium of a cramped, inaccurate Latin jargon or through a clear, definite explanation in English? To this question there would seem to be but one answer; and illustrations abound. In one American class the effort was being made to arrive at the meaning of *lupus*. To help a boy who could not understand, the teacher finally pointed to a fat boy as illustrative of the character of the *lupus*. The perplexed pupil thereupon saw light and called out "pig."

One has only to turn to a book with a direct-method vocabulary (i.e., a vocabulary in which Latin words are defined in Latin) to see how this matter works out. Just a glance at the vocabulary of *Pons Tironum* brings to light the following definitions: *finco, facio; fortis, validus; gratia, amicitia, favor; nequam, nefarius; par, similis, idem; scelus, nefas*. If the direct method rejects the use of English definition because the words of one language are often not exactly translatable into those of another, are we to suppose that such definitions as are given above in Latin will teach the student a nice discrimination in the use of Latin words?

Surely that trench is untenable; and it will have to be admitted that the general vagueness of the first years under the direct method extends to this part of the field also, with a promise of clearing up later. But is not that exactly what happens when the pupil starts with *English* definitions? There seems to be no royal road and no short cut to the acquisition of a fine sense of discrimination in matters of Latin diction. Intimate acquaintance with the masterpieces of the language appears to be the only avenue of approach, and this avenue is not open in the early stages of any method.

Still another question is suggested by chapter v of Mr. Jones's book, wherein he gives an interesting concrete illustration of the actual procedure in the classroom. The questions and answers run along very smoothly in the dialogue between master and class, but the reader cannot help wondering whether the model is not likely to create expectations that are too roseate. It is inevitable that much of the question and answer of the work from day to day will fall into pretty well-defined ruts, so that the answers of the pupil become more or less mechanical. It is not denied that considerable proficiency is gained, especially under certain teachers; the point is that people who merely read a "sample lesson" or visit a "demonstration" easily fall into the error of far overrating the dexterity of the pupils, and go away talking of "the fluency and ease with which both teachers and pupils handle the Latin language."

Though Mr. Jones is heart and soul for the direct method and feels that its adoption in England is absolutely necessary, the candor of the epilogue is charming: "No one can write a book on method,

no one can even pay a visit to the classrooms of a good school, without realising *how small a part method plays in successful teaching*'¹ (p. 157). Here is the situation in a nutshell. Give us broad-gauge, whole-hearted teachers actuated by a generous enthusiasm, and let new methods be tried out within the limits of safe experimentation.

¹ Not italicized in the original.